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O'Boyle, A. (2015). *Teenage talk: speaking, stance-taking, and young people's views of themselves within the education system*. Paper presented at British Educational Research Association Annual Conference 2015, Belfast, United Kingdom.

Document Version:
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BERA 2015 Belfast

Teenage talk: speaking, stance-taking, and young people's views of themselves within the education system (draft)

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Tues 15th September
Parallel Session 1: 11.30-1.00

As an opening to this paper, let me show you an extract of young people responding to questions in a focus group. The focus groups were carried out by a research team investigating the impact of educational reforms on 14-19 year olds across England.

- Interviewer: Okay, let me ask you, what do you think are the most important things that young people might be concerned about in school? What you are concerned about in terms of your school?
- Male Speaker 1: School dinners are crap.
- Male Speaker 2: They are shit, ever since that Jamie Oliver knicked chips.
(laughing)
- Female Speaker : What I don't get it.

Contemporary society is somewhat accustomed to viewing teenagers as a source of amusement, (or indeed frustration if you consider this as a dispreferred or off topic response to the interviewer's question). We can list the comedy characters on British TV through recent decades which represent these everyday perceptions (Kevin the Teenager, Vicky Pollard, Lauren Cooper). However, as illustrated by this extract, and throughout this paper, I'd like to draw attention to the creative and critical ways in which young people play with their speech in presenting their views. As with other semiotic means of presenting their 'self' or 'selves' (e.g. dress, music, computer mediated communication), speech is something largely within *their* control. Such critical and creative (or colourful if you prefer) use of language is used in order to enact a degree of social action in a world which continues to make biological age-related distinctions and demarcations. And arguably does so to dominate, regulate, and 'passivise' less powerful, perceived-to-be more problematic, members of social life.

The position taken in this paper, although not unique, is in contrast to the prevailing cultural and social narratives of young people's communication skills: that is, be they speaking, writing, or new media communication skills, they are in general negatively positioned or lack value (Thurlow, 2007). On the one hand, concern is repeatedly expressed in public discourse at the inadequate communication skills of school leavers and their misuse of English in formal and informal contexts (CBI, 2012; ETF, 2015). Yet on the other there is a downgrading of the role of spoken language in English curriculum matters (Alexander, 2012) and the talk of learners in classrooms in general.

Let me illustrate these latter points: firstly, as a recent news article (March 2015) demonstrates:

"School Leavers Lack Basic Skills in English and Maths"

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11493925/School-leavers-lack-basic-skills-in-English-and-maths.html#disqus_thread

It is not uncommon for public discourse to lament the communication skills (or lack thereof) of young people, and by doing so it adds to and sustains the existing negative narratives of young people on such 'basic' issues. This news article reports on the dissatisfaction experienced by employers regarding basic skills and English qualifications of young employees, noting that employers consider that they (young employees):

"have difficulties in constructing emails, use text speak rather than properly constructed sentences, and have poor spelling and communication skills"(2015:9)

A closer look at the research report conducted by the Education and Training Foundation upon which this news article is based shows that it also contains the perspectives of young people when asked about the same qualification, though this perspective does not make any newspaper headline.

But it really could. While the two perspectives are not entirely aligned, learners share some of the employers' dissatisfaction with the qualification, and like the employers, share a perspective on a similar solution:

"learners consulted say that wanted to understand the relevance, purpose and importance of Maths and English they are studying" (2015:13)

"some learners [...] prefer the idea of studying a more practically based qualification that takes them to their goal of a good functionality by a different route. Many learners find it motivating to master Maths and English if they learn in a work-related context and can relate Maths and English to that context" (2015:13)

..but perhaps such agreement and alignment do not make such good headlines...

The point here is that: the dominant negative narrative continues to be reproduced and, in turn, functions to delegitimize and devalue the speech, stance and views of young people, even in instances like this where they have the potential to offer more creative solutions to a perceived problem.

To further illustrate my point on the devaluing of young people's speech, I turn to the downgrading of the role of talk in classrooms and spoken language in English curriculum matters. As others have repeatedly pointed out (Alexander, 2012) an international body of evidence exists which repeatedly demonstrates how oracy and speaking are fundamental to thinking, learning, and understanding. However, new subject content and assessment objectives for GCSEs in English language and English literature from the Department for Education, for teaching from 2015 onwards, state that:

"Spoken language will be reported on as part of the qualification, but it will not form part of the final mark and grade." (DfE, 2013) ⁱ

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254497/GCSE_English_language.pdf

This has now been implemented, for example, in the AQA New GCSE English Language for 2016 with elements of spoken language forming a non-examined assessment. The "reporting on" spoken language includes reference to a student's ability to "use spoken Standard English appropriately" (cue eye roll and the different paper which is needed to explain all that is wrong with that).

<http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/gcse/english-language-8700/non-exam-assessment-administration>

Unfortunately as we know, because curriculum theorists tell us, what doesn't get tested, doesn't get valued. Inevitably, this curriculum downgrade is a symbolic representation of the lack of value attributed to the spoken language of young people. What seems to matter most is reading and writing and as Alexander (2012) critically notes with similar moves to demote speaking in classrooms: "spoken language is somehow incidental to the 'real business of education'".

Amongst other educational and societal effects, this is likely to sustain the implicit or hidden lack of value or cultural and social importance that is placed on or attributed to the spoken language of young people; their speech is neither valuable nor valued, and their thoughts, understandings and social agency delegitimized.

It is well documented that young people have a critical awareness of language use and the ability to recognize the linguistic features that manifest social, regional, and ethnic differences. Young people too are aware of the low prestige nature of their own language use and how their communication can be viewed by adult others.

However, research *with* young people seeks out opportunities for young people to talk and make perceivable their epistemic and attitudinal positions through speaking. Asked their opinions and experiences, young people enact their positions as social actors in public acts of stance-taking. And do so in playful, expressive and innovative ways. They are, after all the linguistic innovators, whose inventions end up being appropriated (or often misappropriated by adult others, e.g. lol David Cameron, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-18032027>)

The focus group data, which I am now going to draw upon, formed part of a project which investigated the impact of educational reform on 52 schools and colleges across England (see Baird, Elwood, Duffy, Feiler, O'Boyle & Rose, 2011). Complementary quantitative and qualitative approaches to the analysis of teenage talk in 40 focus groups were used. The primary benefits of combining qualitative approaches to the analysis of discourse and quantitative methods of corpus linguistics reside in the identification of common categories across a substantial number of whole focus group transcripts and the ability to direct analysis to representative transcripts for further qualitative analysis. In this manner, whole transcripts can be investigated individually, as they would be using traditional approaches to discourse analysis, but analysis can also be made of all transcripts using quantitative methods for comparative purposes. The analysis was driven by the aim to find out how young people viewed themselves within the UK education system and how they talked about themselves.

So, how do participants talk about themselves within the UK education system?

- 1) They do so as objects rather than actors
 - a. **drumming** all this stuff **into us over and over and over and over** again
 - b. it's obviously **hammered into us** and our whole life
 - c. you kind of **get pushed towards** one subject and you don't want to do it but then because **you're getting** constantly **pushed into** your strengths, even if you want to improve on another part of your schooling you just sort of go 'mah' and **get pushed** where you're going and you just go with it, head down, just go.
- 2) Heterogeneously: not "14-19", but not in "jocks and burnouts" groupings either

When they position themselves in the education system, they do so around much finer-grained positions than a homogenous "14-19 or 16/19", as reflected in education policy. To examine how (and if) young people referred to themselves in discussions about education as a homogenous group, items which signal inclusivity and exclusivity were investigated across the 40 transcripts. Using Wordsmith tools, keywords were examined in all focus groups. A word is key, when its frequency in the text when compared with a set of reference texts is statistically significant (Scott, 2005). In this case, each individual text was compared with the frequency of items from across all 40 texts. A positive key word occurs more often than chance, and a negative key word less often than chance. "We" was found to be a positive keyword in five texts, and a negative keyword in five. In focus groups where 'we' occurred more often, it was used by speakers to refer to themselves as members of the same subject group, year group, or class. When it was used to refer to a larger mass of students, it is used to exclude teachers and parents e.g. the study body. When 'we' is used to refer to the school or institution, it is done so to contrast with other named institutions or different types of institutions. In the five focus groups where 'we' was a negative keyword, these discussions all included accounts of very individual experiences. At points when other students were referred to, named referents were used to describe co-(biological)aged groups. In these discussions the distinctions between the speaker and other young people were markedly more distant. Individuals responded to the questions asked by presenting their views of their experiences and "*couldn't speak for others*". These latter groups and did not offer a stance relying on a shared common ground or collective understanding which signals solidarity in such cases. They expressed a more distanced perspective from their co-age group:

- a. "some people aren't academic"

- b. "snobby people"
- c. "smart people"
- d. "youngsters"
- e. "some people"

As a further methodological point to draw from this analysis, this kind of examination of focus group data not only analyzes the entire dataset, but assists in identifying or informing a selection from within a large dataset, of the data which can then undergo further more fine grained analysis. (For example, further questions can then be pursued on the relationship between students signalled distance and lack of solidarity and their school experiences, assessments or other aspects of school and social life.)

On a lighter note, how do they talk and display their stance in focus groups?

1) With playful and expressive language..and laughter (lol!)

Interviewer:	And what do you think about the teaching, John?
Male Speaker 1:	Some of them stress you. Some are just...
Male Speaker 2:	Some are stressy, some are messy.
Interviewer:	So you don't like it when they're stressy?
Male Speaker 2:	Or messy?
Male Speaker 1:	Yes.
Interviewer:	And thinking about what you want to do in the future, you've all told me quite definitely what you want to do. Is there anybody you talk about this with at all?
Male Speaker 1:	Yes.
Male Speaker 2:	Your parents.
Interviewer:	Your parents?
Male Speaker 3:	Whoever asks me.
Male Speaker 4:	My cat.

There is laughter in the focus group transcripts. It is not part of what might be termed communicative apprehension (Thurlow, 2005), as the researchers' experience of working with young people and carrying out research interviews overruled the transactional nature of the experience to ensure that young people were at ease to talk comfortably. Laughter can often be employed as mitigating and face-saving devices, but in the focus groups laughter happened because students said playful and funny things.

Although this may appear an entertaining aside, these episodes demonstrate the creative and playful use of language, which Stenström (2002) has noted in more conversation-like settings with teenagers. Such moves have serious functions, to fulfil bonding requirements and to negotiate identity constructions, in addition to the providing spontaneity and vitality (Stenström, 2002).

2) Critically: they make choices on how they speak using both standard and youth varieties

At some points in this dataset, yes, features more often found in "youthspeak" (Stenström, 2002) are evident:

- Slang (*man, chav, doss, mate, babe*)
- Swearing (*shit, dickhead*)
- Vague words (*all that malarkey, this BTEC stuff*)
- Non-standard grammatical features, (*ain't; them* as demonstrative pronoun)

- Trendy use of intensifiers (*she is right annoying; well far behind*)

Also, other intensifiers more associated with adult use are found too:

- (*truly jealous, truly envious*).

These features emphasize the social and relational focus which young people give to their language use. Perhaps, young people put to maximum expressive effect one of the things they probably have most control over; their language use. Their focus on social relations and their communicative means to do so can be misrepresented by in cultural portrayals of young people as awkward or unskilful communicators.

3) And they self and peer-monitor their language use

In their discussions, students do not opt to speak for the entire focus group when presenting their views, and take no responsibility for presenting one agreed view or identity of the focus group as a whole. They argue, disagree and tease each other.

...

They seem to conform to the quasi-formal nature of the focus group context, with self and peer monitoring taking place, particularly in relation to the use of taboo words, which works...sometimes and not at others. The point here is that they make choices about language use. To return to the employers, knowledge of language use across genres and registers (and practice using in context). Answer is not to limit opportunities for developing critical awareness of language use, but widen.

To conclude, my aim was to highlight the speaking and stance-taking of young people and their views of themselves within the education system when asked. I also aimed to show contrary to cultural narratives and looming government policy, the creative and critical use of spoken language by young people.

Just to end with the latest 'teenager' reference of the summer news: illustrating that maybe you have to have 'direct access' to get your communication taken seriously:

"Teen snaps David Cameron Eating"

"The Prime Minister took a budget flight to the Algarve to rejoin his family holiday - but not before an eagle-eyed teen took a cheeky selfie"

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/teenager-snaps-david-cameron-eating-6271243>

vs.

"David Cameron spotted on EasyJet flight eating paprika-flavoured Pringles"

"The teenager tweeted the image along with the words: "The Prime Minister was 3 seats away from me eating Paprika Pringles. Help me.""

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/david-cameron-spotted-on-easyjet-flight-eating-pringles-10460502.html>

Help us all.

ⁱ Point of information: this is not the case in the Northern Ireland Curriculum where speaking and listening remain an element of assessment contributing a final grade (controlled assessment totalling 20%) for students taking CCEA GCSE English Language. The research on which this paper is based was carried out in 52 schools and colleges across England (2009-11).